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SUBJECT: EVO AVOIDS SUCRE, JUSTICE MINISTER UNWELCOME TOO

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Summary  
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¶1. (U) Protesters in Sucre hurled insults and firecrackers and proceeded to block Justice Minister Celima Torrico and members of Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party from leaving Bolivia's Supreme Court building following the inauguration of the 2008 judicial year. With strong police protection Torrico eventually escaped the angry crowds. The Supreme Court President used the occasion to once again denounce President Evo Morales' interference in the judiciary. Despite tradition, President Evo Morales and Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera were noticeably absent; government officials cited security as the reason. Morales administration officials immediately responded that the protests were racially motivated, ignoring the fact that the Sucre protesters were venting their frustration over the government's actions during the November 23-25 violence that left three Sucre residents dead and hundreds injured. End Summary.

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Sucre: No Place for the MAS  
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¶2. (U) Despite tradition, President Evo Morales and Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera were noticeably absent from the inauguration of the new (2008) judicial year on January

¶3. The government's highest ranking official in attendance was Justice Minister Celima Torrico. The Vice Minister for Citizen Security Marcos Farfan later stated the president did not travel to Sucre for security reasons. After the inauguration, protesters who had circled the court building prevented Torrico, lower level justice ministry officials, MAS parliamentarians, and other MAS officials from leaving the court building.

¶3. (U) The protesters, mostly young university students, carried signs and shouted epithets against President Morales, Torrico, and Minister of Government Alfredo Rada, as well as

the police and military who were protecting court building. The police had to resort to tear gas to prevent the protesters from entering the court. The protesters moved a burned out vehicle --which previously served as the official car for Constituent Assembly President and MAS delegate Silvia Lazarte-- to the square in front of the Supreme Court.

Signs stating "Evo Murderer" and "Celima Your Car Awaits (referring to the burned car)" were prominently displayed. Protesters burned a copy of the recently approved MAS constitution and a whipala --a flag used by the MAS, but also a symbol for indigenous groups. Protesters attacked and injured a few MAS-istas. The police were finally able to evacuate Minister Torrico in the early morning of January 4.

¶4. (U) Administration officials immediately responded by calling the attacks racially motivated. Justice Vice Minister Wilfredo Chavez was one of the first government officials to respond publicly, stating "We are concerned, I protected myself well to ensure my physical safety, I don't think they accomplished anything by attacking a women of the pollera (a reference to Torrico's traditional skirt that implies the minister is indigenous) who holds public office."

Chavez also cited protesters who shouted four-letter words and racial epithets against Torrico and President Morales. Vice Minister Farfan characterized the protesters as xenophobes who discriminate against Aymara and Quechua indigenous people.

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Stop MAS Interference in the Courts  
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¶5. (U) President of the Supreme Court Hector Sandoval, during his inauguration speech, clearly rejected what he characterized as attacks on, and interference in, the judiciary by President Morales and his MAS party. Sandoval stated "We reject all interference in judicial acts, wherever they may come from, encouraging the other State powers to respect legal norms and judicial rulings." He noted that the government has carried out a systemic campaign to denigrate the courts and the honor of individual of justices. Sandoval also used his speech to highlight weaknesses within the judiciary and called for a national summit between the three branches of power to find mechanisms for "coordination and understanding."

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Comment  
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¶6. (SBU) While there were likely protesters shouting racist comments, the government chose to ignore that the Sucre protesters primary motivation, their frustration and anger over the government's actions during the November 23-25 violence. Instead administration officials immediately pulled out the race card. In recent days government officials have tried to distance the administration from the November violence, arguing that the bullets that killed two young men could not have come from military or police weapons, providing little evidence to support their claims. The January 3 protests indicate that Sucre's residents are not buying the government's arguments. While the MAS may be co-opting the judiciary, the people of Sucre --who once supported the MAS-- appear to have abandoned the party; they certainly hold Evo and his government ministers responsible for what is now being called "Black November." End Comment.  
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